

THE  
CONNELL SHORT GUIDE  
TO



*Queen*  
**MARY I**

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attractive, erudite, and to the point. Bravo!”

**SIR TOM STOPPARD**

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE  
MONARCH IN ONE CONCISE VOLUME

*by Anna Neima*

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# Introduction

Queen Mary I – or “Bloody Mary” as she’s better known – ruled for only five years, from July 1553 to November 1558, and has a strong claim to being the most reviled monarch in English history. Echoing a widespread view, S.T. Bindoff calls her reign “politically bankrupt, spiritually impoverished, economically archaic, and intellectually enervated”; her failure to give birth to an heir has given licence to unkind jibes such as the historian A.F Pollard’s famous conclusion that “sterility was the conclusive note of her reign”. Her reputation has been overshadowed by that of her much-eulogised half-sister Elizabeth: Mary is “the barren Catholic bigot who married an unpopular Spanish prince”, while Elizabeth is “the Virgin Queen and a beacon of Protestant nationalism.” Mary’s central policy – reviving “old world” Catholicism – has been condemned as an abject failure, “a mere hiccup” in the nation’s triumphant and inevitable progress towards the “true religion” of Protestantism. And on top of all that, her rule also saw the loss of Calais, England’s last possession in continental Europe.

On the face of it that’s an abysmal record, but recently a major salvage job has begun on Mary Tudor’s reputation. The great achievement of her having gained the throne at all is increasingly being recognised. And rather than being dismissed as

weak-willed and conventional, she has been re-evaluated by historians such as Judith Richards as a pioneer of female rule, a pathfinder to whom subsequent female monarchs (especially Elizabeth I) owed much. Scholars recognise that her government pursued coherent and generally well-thought-out policies, delivering many notable achievements in a very brief period, and even her strategy for restoring Catholicism is now looked at in a more positive light: if her reign had lasted any longer, England might well now be Catholic. “Bloody” Mary’s poor historical reputation is as much down to bad luck as bad management: “by sheer misfortune she ran into the worst harvests and epidemics in the century and died before her work had any chance to take root”.

This brief survey presents the essential facts of her life and reign – from her upbringing, accession and marriage to her key policies, successes and failures as a ruler – taking in the conflicting views of historians along the way.

## The turbulent early years

Mary’s childhood was one of precarious dignity. Born on 18 February 1516 to Henry VIII and his first wife Katherine of Aragon, she was their first child to survive infancy. Henry was thrilled, and

told the Venetian ambassador, “The Queen and I are both young, and if it is a girl this time, by God’s grace boys will follow.” While this hope lived, Mary was doted on, and she was well educated in the broad humanist Catholic tradition that characterised Henry’s court in the 1520s and 30s.\*

Her mother – the youngest daughter of Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand of Spain – took Mary’s schooling seriously, and consulted the great Spanish humanist Juan Luis Vives for advice, commissioning him to write her a study plan and a treatise on the education of girls. The King, meanwhile, negotiated a series of potential marriages for her: she was promised first, aged two, to the Dauphin, the infant son of Francis I. A few years later she was instead contracted to her cousin, the 22-year-old Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, until he found a bride of childbearing age (his cousin Isabella of Portugal).

When she turned nine, Mary enjoyed a short spell as the *de facto* Princess of Wales (1525-

\*Christian humanism was the religious aspect of the Renaissance, a movement of cultural revival that sought inspiration from the classical past. Returning to the original texts of Christianity and seeking to reform the church in line with their teachings, it informed both Catholic and Protestant thought in the sixteenth century.

\*\*The Princess of Wales is a courtesy title traditionally granted to the wife of the Prince of Wales, the heir apparent to the English throne. As Henry’s intended successor, Mary was given many of the rights and properties usually conferred on the Prince of Wales, but she was never formally given the title.

1528).\*\* Although she was never actually invested with the title, she presided over her own household and was presented to the world as England's future sovereign. In these early years she was described as a pretty, precocious, lively girl who inspired deep affection in the women of her entourage and in her household officers.

Unfortunately for Mary, this pleasant period was short-lived. Her mother could not oblige Henry in his desire for a male heir, and when the king began to address himself to solving that problem, Mary's life underwent a drastic change. She was traumatised by seeing her father first try to persuade the Pope to annul his marriage to her mother (on the basis that she was the widow of his brother and therefore unclean), and then rid himself of her in a divorce that also heralded the beginning of the English Reformation. He made himself "Supreme Head of the Church of England under Christ", annulled his own marriage and severed jurisdictional links to Rome.

During most of this period mother and daughter were kept apart. Katherine was banished from court. Mary's household was dissolved and she was sent in 1533, aged 17, to join the household of her new half-sister Elizabeth, daughter of Henry's second wife Anne Boleyn. Mary was deemed illegitimate and demoted from princess to "the lady Mary". She was often ill at this time, but in spite of her feeble state of health she showed the fiery stubbornness that would emerge as one of her

chief characteristics by refusing ever to acknowledge Anne as queen. Henry was enraged, and he forbade her from seeing her mother as she was dying, or from attending her funeral in 1536.

After Anne was beheaded, Elizabeth too was declared illegitimate, and the two shared the burden of being cast out of courtly life. Henry's tender-hearted third wife, Jane Seymour, urged him to make peace with Mary, but the king insisted his daughter first accept him as supreme head of the church and admit the illegality of his marriage to Katherine. Mary tried to placate him by submitting to his authority, but only in so far as "God and my conscience" permitted. Ultimately, though, she was persuaded to sign a document agreeing to all his demands, including a declaration that her parent's marriage "was by God's law and man's law incestuous and unlawful". These were concessions that "would haunt her for the rest of her life" – but they allowed her to resume her place at court.

The last decade of Henry's reign was easier on Mary. When Edward was born to Jane Seymour in 1537, Mary was made his godmother – a clear sign of her rehabilitation with the king. She acted as chief mourner when his mother died soon after. Although she was still treated as illegitimate, she reintegrated into life at court. She was particularly close to Henry's last wife Catherine Parr, with whom she shared a good humanist education and an interest in fashion. During the rest of Henry's

reign there is very little evidence of what Mary's life was like, except in connection with a new series of marriage plans for her, taken up and then quickly abandoned. Her suitors included Duke Philip of Bavaria, who she found particularly repugnant because he was a Lutheran.\* The climax of her years living in Henry's court came in 1544, when both she and Elizabeth were reinstated as heirs to the throne in the Act of Succession.

## How did Catholic Mary fare under Protestant Edward VI?

On Henry VIII's death in 1547 his son Edward VI, aged nine, was too young to rule in person. But the regency council that governed in his stead was dominated by religious reformers, bringing more storms for Mary. Where Henry had been content with breaking with Rome, authorising an English Bible and making limited Protestant doctrinal advances, Edward's councillors sought to complete the transition to full-blown Protestantism. Though Mary accepted her brother's right to succeed, she quickly moved away from the royal court, enabling her to follow Catholic practice and to take control of the huge estates in Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex left to her by her father, making her one of the

wealthiest landowners in the kingdom. Despite her detachment from the national religious question, she was naturally regarded with suspicion by the council as a potential focal point for opposition.

As Edward's reign progressed Mary came under increasing pressure to conform to the councillors' radical programme of reform. The Act of Uniformity of 1549 prescribed that all church services were to be held in English with fully Protestant rites. Mary remained defiant and increased the number of times the traditional Catholic Mass was celebrated in her household. Several of her household officers were imprisoned as heretics, but she herself was able to defy the council's new laws because of her wealth, her standing as heir apparent, and, most importantly, because Charles V – the most powerful man in Europe – set himself up as her protector, threatening war with England if Mary's religious liberty was curtailed.

When Mary attended a Christmas royal reunion with Elizabeth and Edward in 1550, the 12-year-old king reduced both himself and Mary to tears by publicly reproving her for ignoring his laws regarding worship. Nevertheless, she continued her dissent, and the king's council tried

\* Lutheranism was launched in 1517 by the German cleric Martin Luther's efforts to reform the Catholic Church. Ultimately this resulted in a split from the Roman See, the development of a new branch of Protestantism and the spread of the Protestant Reformation across Europe.

to sidestep the problem by marrying her off to a Protestant foreign power. Mary refused. From the safety of her vast estates, she wrote them a stern – and principled – no: “I would rather refuse the friendship of all the world . . . than forsake any point of my faith.”

## Mary’s rise to power

Mary has gone down in history as weak, unimaginative and conventional, yet her ascent to the throne was nothing short of remarkable. C.S.L. Davies called it “the only successful rebellion in



### MARY IN PERSON

The critic Daniel Soar, in the “She is of spare and delicate frame, quite unlike her father, who was tall and stout . . . When younger she was considered not merely tolerably handsome, but of beauty exceeding mediocrity. At present, with the exception of some wrinkles,

caused more by anxieties than by age, which makes her appear some years older, her aspect, for the rest, is very grave. Her eyes are so piercing that they inspire not only respect, but fear in those on whom she fixes them . . . Her voice is rough and loud, almost like a man’s, so that when she speaks she is always heard a long way off . . . “But whatever may be the amount deducted from her physical endowments, as much more may with truth, and without flattery, be added to those of her mind, as, besides the facility and quickness of her understanding, which

Tudor England” and Jennifer Loach “one of the most surprising events of the sixteenth century”.

As the 15-year-old Edward lay dying in 1553, determined to safeguard his Protestant legacy, he declared that both his half-sisters were excluded from the throne since they were illegitimate. In a blatant refutation of Henry’s Act of Succession, Edward turned to his cousin, Lady Jane Grey, and appointed her his heir. When he died, “few would have wagered positively” on Mary’s chances of securing the throne. She was a sickly woman exiled in the country with few declared supporters. On the other hand, almost all of Edward’s leading advisers supported Jane. She was married to a son

comprehends whatever is intelligible to others, even to those who are not of her own sex (a marvellous gift for a woman), she is skilled in five languages . . .

“She is like other women, being sudden and passionate, and close and miserly, rather more so than would become a bountiful and generous queen . . . whilst in certain things she is singular and without an equal, for not only is she brave and valiant, unlike other timid and spiritless women, but she is so courageous and resolute that neither in

adversity nor peril did she ever even display or commit any act of cowardice or pusillanimity, maintaining always, on the contrary, a wonderful grandeur and dignity, knowing what became the dignity of a sovereign as well as any of the most consummate statesmen in her service.”

Giovanni Michieli, the Venetian ambassador to Mary’s court, 1557

of the extremely powerful Duke of Northumberland (Lord President of the council during the later years of Edward's minority), and she unequivocally shared Edward's religious views. More importantly, her supporters controlled all aspects of the administration in London, and they had the support of the French – even Mary's greatest ally, the powerful Charles V, felt he could do nothing.

Jane was proclaimed queen. Yet her supporters fell short in one crucial respect: they failed to gain control of Mary. Secretly forewarned of Edward's fatal illness, she had fled to her East Anglian estates to rally her forces. This she did surprisingly quickly and effectively. Jane's supporters in London found that their political power meant nothing without the support of the masses – who turned their back on the Protestant clique in power in favour of Henry VIII's eldest daughter.

Mary entered the capital on the back of a groundswell of popular support on 3 August 1553. Historians debate how she managed this great feat. Most attribute it to the broad backing of the people – while some argue that this came from her perceived “legitimacy and legality”, based in Henry's will and Act of Succession, others see it as chiefly motivated by religion. A third view is that, rather than mass popularity, it was the successful machinations of her faithful household retinue in



*The Execution of Lady Jane Grey by Paul Delaroche, 1833*

exploiting the personal ties that Mary had gradually built up over her lifetime that enabled her to take the throne. Whichever way – and the truth is probably a combination of all three – Mary was proclaimed queen amid bonfires and ringing bells. Jane, now known as the “Nine Day Queen”, was imprisoned in the Tower of London for high treason. Belying her bloody historical reputation, Mary initially spared her life. She was executed, however, after being implicated in Wyatt's rebellion of 1554.

*To read the **FULL** Connell Short Guide to Queen Mary I or to discuss a History school subscription, get in touch with our team: [info@connellguides.com](mailto:info@connellguides.com) or on 0207 993 2644.*

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